

Back Again, Back Again: We Choose Our Own Destinies

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirteen: We choose our own destinies.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Luckily, it also meant that no soldiers of the crown would be caught drinking in a tavern so delicately walking the line between a drunk den and a rebel house.

It was loud inside, and despite my fears, it didn't go questing-movie silent as we walked in. No one turned to look at us or spit in my face or anything -- and though I kept nervously checking to make sure my hood wasn't showing any of my hair, I wasn't the only one with my hood up, so it was hardly odd.

Rhia found us a table towards the back, near one of the hearths that roared with fire -- it was too hot an evening for most people to want this sort of heat. Rhysea stayed useasonably

warm, their autumn much longer than Georgia ever offered, and stayed warmer even longer than the south I knew. They were the few tables in the establishment that still remained empty.

And then Rhia disappeared, instructing me not to leave or talk to anyone in the most simple Rhysean she could manage as she left to track down a server or -- something. A boy around my age set a flagon down in front of me with a smile and said something I didn't understand -- so I nodded, trying to look gruff and brooding so he'd leave -- but didn't drink from it, because I didn't know if it was poisoned or how much it cost or if we'd even brought money at all. I hadn't asked. I hadn't thought of it. It smelled weird, though, like oranges gone to mush. That gross old-citrus-y smell. It was Traem, as I later found out.

It's shit, by the way, as far as liquor goes. Though I don't suppose you drink this stuff for the taste.

Rhia came back a few minutes later, dragging a girl with her so flirtatiously I figured they had to be some sort of involved.

Rhia sat herself down in the chair opposite mine. The girl -- who'd been in the corner playing some sort of oddly-shaped card game -- perched on the edge of the table.

She introduced her as a *friend*, putting the emphasis on the word in a way that implied they'd definitely seen each other in

a lot less clothing and a lot more privately several times. If Rhia ever said her name, I didn't catch it, as they were speaking Rhysean much too fast for me to catch much of anything. The words I did get were *flowers* and *lover* and *me* and *game* -- or, more *an entertainment*.

Lover? I parroted back, one of the few words I'd caught.

Rhia stared blankly back. *I don't know what you mean*, she said in slow Rhysean, as if it were a joke. Then the other girl said something like *drink* and made a motion of downing a glass, pointing to the flagon in front of me, and with a nod from Rhia, I tried to block out the smell and tentatively raised it to my lips, taking a sip.

And instantly started sputtering, because it was like lemon-scented windex and dirt and piss all at once. They both laughed; Rhia snagged the glass and poured at least half of it down her throat, and then they started talking so fast I didn't know anything at all.

The two of them disappeared again -- Rhia sitting in the same chair as the girl back at the cards table, the girl slipping her something from the stack of winning she was collecting that made Rhia laugh -- the free, wild laugh I'd come to know in the starlight.

I quickly looked away, feeling like it was too private to watch. A bard-type -- another kid around my age, with onyx-black

hair in tight coils that moved with their head and barely missed catching on their shoulders -- swept back and forth several tables away, hands moving wildly. They were night-sky dark and unfairly gorgeous and had some kind of... lute? -- stringed-instrument thingy -- pushed on a strap back over their shoulder.

They were pontificating to a group of disinterested teen-adult types in the corner. Although the din was too loud all around me to have any sort of idea what they were saying, the bard finally looked frustrated enough that they stood up on the table and picked up their lute.

Everyone went quiet at this. The tavern held its breath, for the space of six, seven seconds, and apprehension glossed over their eyes for just a second before they began to sing.

I'll never be able to describe their voice in a way that accurately encapsulates how it sounds. It sent goose bumps running along my skin and -- do you know what it sounds like for a choir to sing in a packed cathedral? The air is warm and alive with the breaths of a thousand people but they're all holding theirs as harmony echoes its way through the rafters and towards them.

That isn't the bard's voice. But that's the feeling that it gave. No matter how many times I heard them sing, the reaction

was always the same. Like -- Orpheus, from Greek mythology. When they sang, the world couldn't help but lean in and listen.

This is Leander. You're just now meeting them, but they'll be back. And they'll be more important than you know. Then I knew -- could ever have known.

But not yet. There's still miles to go before we reach their road.

And the song? It starts off slow -- it always did. And I can't sing, can't become a bard or bring your ears anything other than pain with my voice, but -- all the same. Something like this -- but in Rhysean, much prettier, in a voice like Orpheus. Do me the favor of imagining it so.

I do know how this will end. With one of us crowned and one of us dead. And I, oh I, tell the story still. Waiting for my cup to fill. But before then, days stretch ahead. But before then, there's road still ahead.

And then -- we all know this part. The prophecy told on my sword: there will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a ruler, who will bring the tyrant low.

And it changed, from there. I didn't know the song at the time -- the voice was the only thing I knew, but even I realized the words weren't the same as it went along. Same tune, different words, and it became something everyone knew -- a great Experience, capital E, as all in the tavern began to join

in a story they'd obviously heard many times before. *There will come a soldier, there will come a poet, there will come a King who will right this broken world.* Someone was pounding on the table in time with the lute, and all were singing and dancing around the tables. I got so caught up in this I didn't even realize the danger as the boy who brought me my drink pulled me up to dance, but my hood fell back as I stood and --

The place Rhia chose to sit turned out to have been rather inauspicious. For the fire burned bright and hid nothing, and there's only one person who had hair like mine.

And they had watched her set fire to the bodies of their friends.

It turned out that my earlier fears were right -- that those that had fallen were not the only ones aligned with the rebel cause. I may have been the Girl That Starts It All -- the rumored prophecy child, the rumored soldier/poet/king, but I was a way they could have vengeance with no king's soldiers to stop them.

I understood close to nothing. Rhia stood on a table and yelled something about not telling anyone, and that I would help them, that it was safest for me if they said nothing.

But isn't that the wrong thing to say to those who had spent their lives anything but safe? Isn't that the wrong thing

to say, that I would help them, when I had spent all my time there doing anything but?

It's hard to lay blame, looking back. To spite them for spiting me, not when I'd done so much wrong.

They knew I worked for the palace. And they had too much fire in their bellies for reason.

O judgement! Thou have fled to brutish beasts, and men have lost their reason.

Rhia was beside me in a moment. She looked frightened, and we ran.

We made it all the way through the woods, my heart in my throat in a very different sort of way, and suddenly, ironically, I was thankful for all the mornings Cassian forced me running with him because I wasn't gasping for air quite like I could be.

I was shaky scaling the trellis back up to my room. The people of *Elegidanim Traem* weren't stupid enough to follow this far, but fear still made my throat raw and it only got worse as I started to see the sky turn pink at the horizon's edge. I started to curse -- because *shit, shit, Cassian* --

We clambered in through the window and it became horribly clear that I was right to be worried.

Cassian sat on the edge of my bed. And he did not look happy.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.